Review: CW's 'Charmed' Reboot Sure Is Feminist, All Right

By Tori Preston | TV | October 16, 2018

Header Image Source: CW

Plot Spoilers for the first episode ahead!

I'll be honest: the most I heard about the CW's "fierce, funny, feminist reboot" of *Charmed* was the initial controversy involving the reactions of the original actors. In particular, Holly Marie Combs criticized the series for "capitalizing" on the hard work of the original cast and crew, and said, "I will never understand what is fierce, funny, or

feminist in creating a show that basically says the original actresses are too old to do a job they did 12 years ago." Others also took issue with the idea that this reboot was being marketed as fierce, funny, and feminist, as if the implication is that the original series somehow *wasn't* any of those things.

Well, after watching the pilot, now I get it. Sure, the original series was about powerful, independent women who supported each other. It was feminist. But the reboot is "feminist" in quotation marks. It makes feminism a plot point. It's so on-the-nose that it makes the mother the head of a Women's Studies department at a local college, and has a white man brag of his feminist bonafides by noting that he'd been retweeted by Roxane Gay, and has one of the Charmed Ones say "When it comes to consent I can change my mind anytime" WHILE FIGHTING OFF A DUDE POSSESSED BY A DEMON. Hell, the big climax finds the sisters combining their powers to battle a bigger demon who feeds on women... and has been masquerading as a sexual harassing professor. This isn't just a feminist show — it's a calculated, self-aware 2018 #MeToo-era feminist show. It's admirable, but it isn't seamless, and that's my problem. I agree with everything the show is saying — hell, I applaud it! — but *Charmed* was so eager to hit all the rape culture talking points that it has turned them into punch lines. And that's a shame.

But the good news is that I don't think that's a fatal flaw. I cut pilots a lot of slack because they are trying to establish so much in a single episode, and their scripts have usually been tooled and re-tooled ad nauseum. Frankly, they're almost always too blunt. I'm curious to see how that same fierce feminism is presented in future episodes, when the show has more time to breathe. If *Charmed* can integrate its political bent rather than just shouting out all the greatest catchphrases, it just might be a force to be reckoned with. And considering the showrunning team of Jessica O'Toole, Amy Rardin, and Jennie Snyder Urman all hail from *Jane The Virgin* (and the dearly departed *Selfie*, RIP), I think the potential is there.

So: What about the story? Well, *Charmed* is about two sisters who find out they have a secret third half-sister, and that all three of them are the Charmed Ones, who are "destined to save the world from impending doom" — and, presumably, from a lot of supernatural Baddies-of-the-Week. They have their mother's grimoire, the Book of Shadows, and their very own guardian angel, or Whitelighter, named Harry (a pompous white Brit in the Giles from *Buffy* vein). Mel Vera (Melonie Diaz) and her sister Maggie (Sarah Jeffery) still live with their mother, a respected college professor, in a place called Hilltowne. The audience learns early on that mama is a witch, as we see her fighting off ravens (or crows? I can never tell the difference) and cold air in the attic — then she dispels the evil by announcing, "Hear this: I have three!" Only I guess she didn't really dispel it, because Mel and Maggie return home to find their mother lying dead on the ground, having fallen out of the attic window.

Fast forward three months, and Macy Vaughn (Madeleine Mantock) moves to Hilltowne to take a lab position with the aforementioned evil professor, who has subsequently beaten his harassment complaints now that Mel and Maggie's mother is no longer at the university to fight against him. I should point out that at this point, his "evil" is just being creepy — no one realizes yet that he's actually a demon. Anyway, Macy recognizes the Vera home from an old photo of her and her mother, and realizes she may have a connection to it. You see, she believed her mother died when she was two, but now she's wondering if actually she was just abandoned? So she shows up and meets Mel and Maggie, and that's when the weird sh*t starts. And by that I mean their powers start manifesting.

Macy is the eldest sister — a woman of science who believes there is a rational explanation for everything. Her power turns out to be telekinesis, as she starts accidentally throwing things with her mind. Mel is the middle daughter, an outspoken activist and grad student in her mother's old department. She's also a lesbian, who was in a relationship with a detective named Niko until Niko dumped her shortly after her mother's death. Niko claims it was because Mel was too angry. But since Niko was assigned to investigate the death, it was also a pretty clear conflict of interest that NO ONE EVEN CALLS OUT. Anyway, Mel starts to be able to freeze time... but can only do it when she isn't angry. Yup, she's an angry feminist who literally needs to calm down (INSERT EYEROLL). Maggie is the youngest sister, a college freshman who is pledging a sorority (much to Mel's dismay). Her power is telepathy, which is inconvenient because the inner thoughts of sorority sisters can be harrowing.

Mel loathes the fact that a cishet white man named Harry has taken over the Women's Studies department after her mother's death, but it turns out that he's their Whitelighter — a guardian angel who conveniently arrives to info-dump all the important details of What's Really Going On to the Charmed Ones. And he's played by Rupert Evans, who I feel like I should know from a lot of things but really I just recognize him from *Hellboy*. Anyway, it's a little off-putting that *Charmed* made such a big deal out of hiring a racially diverse cast to play the leads, and then they rework the origin story so those women have some dead white dude around to explain everything to them, but I've also been programmed to automatically accept a Giles when I see one — and Harry is a fairly entertaining, prissy riff on the Giles type if I'm being honest. It helps that the big episode-ending twist is a Ouija board warning from their dead mother, saying (spelling?): "DON'T TRUST HARRY." So, that's gonna be a thing moving forward.

According to the Book of Shadows, the first sign of this whole impending doom thing is, uh, "When the weakest of men reaches ill-gotten glory," which is such a sick Trump burn that I kinda fell in love with the show just a little. The book also contains a blink-and-you'll-miss-it nod to one of the Halliwell sisters' ancestors, which is a handy little easter egg for fans of the original series. But really, the groundwork from the original is all still there, with enough tweaks to make it seem like a true reimagining rather than a pointless rehash. Will it honor the legacy of the original while bringing it a renewed, modern relevance? I hope so. This is the perfect time to bring some kick-ass stories of witchcraft and women's power to our lives. But honestly, I'd settle for it just being an entertaining CW diversion.

After all, we've still got Netflix's *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* ahead to give us that witchy fix!

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